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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: ASAD DEMANDS RE-ENGAGEMENT

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary. In back-to-back interviews with European media, (Der Spiegel and El Pais), President Asad made points in public that we have heard in private: the SARG will not allow the status quo to endure; the only way to avoid further conflict is if there is a policy-level USG re-engagement of the SARG; if the USG decides it wants re-engagement, it will first have to offer the SARG something Syria wants on either the peace process, Lebanon, or Iraq. The SARG,s newfound assertiveness, which dates most immediately from Asad,s confrontational August 15 speech but has been building since last December, is generally viewed as a clear sign of the self-confidence it feels as a result of Hizballah,s perceived victory in Lebanon, its strengthened ties with Iran, Hamas' election victory, and the regime having survived the intense international pressure it felt last fall as a result of the Mehliis investigation and the resulting UN security council resolutions. Contacts opine that Asad,s choice of European media reflects his sense that the mood has shifted in Europe and the time is now ripe for pressing the Europeans to change policy -- hopefully leading to a US change. End summary.

¶2. (U) President Bashar Asad made similar points in his October 1 interview with the Spanish El Pais to those he had made with Der Spiegel, on September 24. In both interviews Asad attacked at length US foreign policy in the region, while at the same time emphasized the necessity of the USG re-engaging Syria. In both interviews, Asad was transparently playing to his European audience when asserting that peace was not possible without the Europeans pushing the Americans to change policy. In the Der Spiegel interview, which followed on the heels of the attack on the U.S. Embassy, Asad repeatedly commented that the Embassy attack was a consequence of US foreign policy in the region. As he has in all of his speeches since the Hariri assassination, Asad also took a hard line against the anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon, labeling them &enemies.8 He further asserted that Israel was an enemy of Syria. Though he did not specifically name the U.S. as an enemy, the implication was clearly there.

¶3. (U) At the same time, Asad,s interviews communicated an intention to force America,s hand. Asad commented in both interviews that many within Syria believe war is the only solution to the current impasse. Though he asserted in his most recent interview that relations with the U.S. were

&nearly severed,8 he returned repeatedly to the need for U.S. reengagement. His refrain in both interviews was that the U.S. must &listen8 to Syria and that the Europeans &must8 talk to the Americans to make them understand that necessity. To reengage, however, the Syrians would want their own interests to be advanced, asserted Asad. It is up to America to take the initiative and offer something on &Lebanon, Iraq, or the Middle East peace process,8 commented Asad.

¶4. (C) Asad,s interviews coincided with the SARG leaking to regional media that FM Walid Mouallem had met with high ranking officials from both US political parties on the margins of the UNGA. Though editorials in the state-owned papers remain rabidly critical of US policy, Syrians who follow the news closely report the SARG is signaling the continued importance it attaches to a relationship with the US.

¶5. (C) Comment. Asad,s two recent interviews point to a SARG that continues to desire reengagement with the USG, though increasingly on its own terms. The Iranian card is certainly part of the SARG,s calculation as the regime listens carefully to the rising European chorus demanding reengagement of Syria as a way to split the regime from Iran.

Interestingly, there has been no obvious similar effort towards the French, which may reflect the SARG calculation that ultimately it must come to some understanding with the US if it is to achieve its objectives in the region.

CORBIN